Piers Plowman offers its students difficult reading, seeming at times almost impenetrable. C.S. Lewis gave popular expression to this common reaction with his remark that Langland was "confused and monotonous, and hardly makes his poetry into a poem." Naturally, not all scholars agreed, and the apologists for unity and coherence have been many. Yet, regardless of how astute the analyses or how convincing the arguments put forth by the "unitarians," many readers continue to share the experience articulated by Mary Carruthers:

The belief that Piers Plowman does mean something is one that its readers and critics have clung to tenaciously, sometimes vainly, often desperately, through the poem’s many incongruities, twists, and turns. It is a belief to which I subscribe as well, though I admit to attacks of doubt along the way.

Qualms of this sort have unnerved would-be believers especially in the final two or three passus, where the undermining of recent spiritual achievements — Christ’s triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the harrowing of hell, the joy of Easter morning, and the founding of Unite — with the chaotic final vision of disruption and disorder leaves many readers dissatisfied. I shall argue
throughout this paper, however, that much of the modern dissatisfaction with *Piers Plowman* lies not with the chaotic surface of the text, but with its cultural distance, and that this most mediaeval of poems requires of its audience familiarity with rhetorical schemes thoroughly mediaeval in character.

Recent criticism increasingly focuses on the linguistic bases of interpretation, and frequently discovers in the text support for the uneasiness sensed by Lewis and Carruthers. Priscilla Martin suggests that Langland strains his allegorical structure, so that a conflict arises between the abstract and the concrete levels of discourse: "Langland seems to be having it both ways. He is both employing and sabotaging the potentialities for concreteness in the allegorical mode." She maintains that Langland sabotages his allegory by over-valuing concrete details, so that instead of supporting or illustrating the abstract bases of thought, they overwhelm the image, changing semantic direction, so to speak, and thereby distorting and impeding our understanding.

The Christ-Knight metaphor seems a case in point. Most critics agree that the central thrust of the metaphor in *Piers Plowman* occurs in Passus XVIII and XIX:

Oon semblable to the Samaritan, and somdeel to Piers the Plowman,  
Barefoot on an asse bak bootles cam prikye,  
Withouten spores other spere; spakliche he lokied,  
As is the kynde of a knyght that cometh to be dubbed,  
To geten hym gilte spores on galoches ycouped.

When the dreamer asks Faith, "an heraud of armes" (XVIII 16), about who should "juste in Jerusalem" (XVIII 19), Faith replies:

"This Jesus of his gentries wol juste in Piers armes,  
In his helm and in his haubergeon — humana natura.  
That Crist be noght biknowe here for consummatus Deus,  
In Piers paltok the Plowman this prikiere shal ryde;  
For no dynt shal hym dere as in deitate Patris."

While the Christ-Knight metaphor in its unadorned or bare state continues throughout Passus XVIII, it surfaces for serious critical consideration once again in Passus XIX, where it functions as the foundation of what Pamela Gradon calls a "prismatic image which refracts the situation into all its implications." When the dreamer asks Conscience whether the figure before him is "Jesus the justere" (XIX 10) or Piers, Conscience answers:
Quod Conscience, and kneled tho, 'Thise arn Piers armes —
Hise colours and his cote armure; ac he that cometh so blody
Is Crist with his cros, conquerour of Cristene.' (XIX 12-14)

What we see in this "prismatic image" is a figure of speech which acts
as the "concrete" basis of more elaborate "allegorical" expression. Clearly
Langland's emphasis lies with the theme of the Incarnation and Christ's
humanity, which these images convey through appropriate figurae.

Although the Christ-Knight metaphor provides the "structure" of these
images, the scaffold upon which other associations can be hung, it does not
in itself convey more than a convenient and traditional comparison in these
quotations. Gradon, for example, insists that the metaphor can and must be
separated from the other elements fused with it. She observes that "we have
a mixture of personification and of the analogies with Piers Plowman and
the Good Samaritan and a knight going to joust." The most important
features of this mixture, she continues, are the "figurae" of Piers and the
Good Samaritan; the Christ-Knight metaphor is a commonplace, providing
"just the kind of allegorical narrative needed" but no more. Martin, too,
voices the opinion that the metaphor serves a higher purpose. Christ rides
in his "paltok," she argues, but the ploughman's garment "displaces the
more glamorous metaphor of the knight's armour and becomes the other
nature of the abstract impassible Latinate divinity."

Other critics approach the Christ-Knight metaphor in somewhat dif­
ferent but essentially related ways. Raymond St-Jacques also isolates the
passages from Piers Plowman I have cited above, and concludes that Lang­
land's image of Christ the Warrior-Knight draws heavily on sermons and the
liturgy in order to express "ideas of armour, the Incarnation, and the Pas­
son" so present and vivid in the "forms of communal worship." More re­
cently, James Simpson describes how Langland uses "the earthly institution
of nobility . . . to describe a spiritual reality," but links the Christ-Knight
metaphor to mediaeval institutions and to an "acceptance of the social or­
der . . . carefully set within, and in some ways prompted by, an awareness
of true spiritual freedom and equality before God." And R.A. Waldron
demonstrates how Langland's "chivalric additions" to the stock metaphor
of Christ the Warrior-Knight forge "parallels between the feudal society
and the transcendental society which . . . highlight the theological issues
of the atonement and the redemption of mankind." In all instances, the
metaphor becomes qualified beyond itself — the dominant level of signifi­
cance moves beyond the metaphorical base towards allegorical expressions
of the theological, the social, and the liturgical.
I think these comments accurately reflect our impression of the Christ-Knight metaphor and its function in *Piers Plowman*. We notice it, but on the whole feel it is uninteresting compared to the richer, complex image of Christ/Samaritan/Piers and other associations. And yet the metaphor also exists outside of these prismatic contexts — in Passus XVIII in the scenes dealing with Christ’s Crucifixion and Longinus, and according to Waldron, in the background to the Harrowing of Hell scene, and, as Gaffney points out, extensively in Passus XVI. In other words, the Christ-Knight metaphor seems to insist on itself and not just on its combinative function; in fact, in terms of simple line count, the Christ-Knight metaphor exists independently in *Piers Plowman* more frequently than as the basis of allegory. Has the allegory, therefore, been sabotaged yet again? Has Langland here over-valued the concrete (the metaphor), to use Martin’s terminology, and sent the reader in other semantic directions, which, if they do not conflict with the central theme, at least detract from it? Why, in other words, did Langland not leave well enough alone? Why, when he had found a potent image of the Incarnation, did he undermine it by employing its bases in a completely different way? These are the questions I should like to turn to now.

Critics notice two metaphorical traditions in the mediaeval period. The first and earliest stresses Christ the warrior — the valiant fighter who combats death and the devil in order to liberate mankind; here the stress falls upon Christ’s sacrifice and victory. In the later tradition, the chivalric tradition, Christ is the lover knight who rescues a lady (mankind); here the emphasis is on the suffering of Christ and on the lady’s obligation to acknowledge his worthiness as her lover:

The unbounded loyalty of a lover deserved a reciprocal courtesy and consideration in his mistress, and a lady lacking in these would show a churliness particularly unfitting in one of gentle birth.

Gaffney linked the Christ-Knight metaphor in *Piers Plowman* directly to a poem written in French by an Englishman, Nicolas Bozon, but St-Jacques claims that “Langland’s knight is . . . a warrior and not a lover, having very little in common with the courtly knight of Gaffney’s sources including Bozon’s poem.”

Certainly, Langland seems to have stressed the warrior over the lover. Yet, if we examine the development of the Christ-Knight metaphor, we see that Langland really modifies the erotic element of the chivalric metaphor, and that rather than abandoning the romantic in favour of the heroic, he extends the chivalric metaphor along familiar fourteenth-century lines.
Although he finds certain parallels between Langland’s use of the Christ-Knight metaphor and Bozon’s poem, Gaffney observes that the first use of this metaphor in any extended sense in English occurred much earlier in the Ancrene Riwle. Here the human soul is compared to a lady in an earthen castle besieged by foes, while Christ is the liberating knight. This is the standard representation. Yet another interesting point arises in the narrative. Regardless of how worthy the Christ-Knight is or how much he has suffered in combat, the lady seems not to notice, and this occasions the narrator’s reaction:

He com him seolf on ende, schawde hire his feire neb, as þe þe wes of alle men feherest to bihalden, spec se swiðe swoteliche & wordes se murie þet ha mahten deade arearen to liue, wrahte feole wundres & dude muchele meistries biuoren hire ehsihœ, shawde hire his mihte, talde hire of his kinedom, bead to makien hire cwen of al þet he ahte. Al þis ne heold nawt. Nes þis hoker wunder? . . . Nere þeos ilke leafdi of uueles cunnes cunde, 3ef ha ouer alle þing ne luuede him her efter?20

Although not the point of the Ancrene Riwle narrative, the lady’s response or her inappropriate response became one of the central emphases of the later chivalric Christ-Knight metaphor,21 and accompanies the focus on the suffering humanity of Christ, as in Bozon’s poem:

Regardez ma face cum est demanglee,
Regardez moun corps, cum est pur vous placee,
Auisez moun escu cum est deberdisé
Ê ne quydez ja ke seez refusé.22

The response, then, is a part of the “chivalric” Christ-Knight metaphor, and the image of the suffering knight becomes an argument in favour of the lady’s (mankind’s) acceptance; Christ’s painful death deprives mankind of any but the appropriate response of loving him and reminds mankind of Christ’s love.23 The proper response, conversely, symbolizes the effects of the redemption.

This metaphor together with the theme of response appears in countless lyrics and sermons of the period. At times, the corresponding language of courtly love is included, as in the following excerpt from the Fasciculus Morum:

Beholde myne woundes, how sore I am dy3th,
For all þe wele þatþou hast I wan it in fy3t.
I am sore woundet, behold on my skyn.
Leue lyf, for my loue let me comen in.24

JAMES WELDON 117
In some works, the erotic motif disappears, and along with it the figure of the lady; although the metaphor remains the same, the appeal to the appropriate response is now made directly to mankind: "Be-hold my woundes wide, man, and se / My blood þ at I shedde in batayl for the." It is this modified chivalric metaphor of the Christ-Knight together with the appeal to mankind’s proper response which figures so prominently in sermons of the period. For example, in the following extracts from mediaeval sermons, the emphasis rests on the idea of response and not with feudal obligations:

Dan he, for þe grete zele and loue of man, shewed hym-selfe nowthe as lord and God of all þinge, but as a pore childe bonden in a cribbe be-twix a nox and a nasse. But take hede of is commynge at þat tyme, þe wiche evey Cristen man and womman oveþ for to blisse, for he losed vs owte of the þraldam of þe fende, and made vs able to com to þe blisse of heven. Here-to acordeþ þe holy apostell, ad Romanos, 6, seyinge on þis wize, "Nunc autem liberati a peccato serui autem facti Deo — be þe commynge and þe tyme of Cristes burthe we be delyverd from synne and made þe seruauntes of oure Lord God." Sethen, þan, þat itt is so þat afor Cristes commynge we were vnabull for to com to þe blisse of heven, and he in ys commynge mad vs abull, þan awþ we well to worshippe hym and blisse hym as oure saviour ....

Euery man in þis worlde is a seruaunte for þre skilles: þe firste, for he is gette in batell; þe seconde for he is boughte with a precious iewell; and þe þride, for he is þe childe of a seruante . . . Euery Cristen man in þis worlde . . . walkeþ in þe veye, I hope, towarde heven. For whan þat þou shale walke þat veye, þou shale mete withe a knyght, þe wiche is Criste, Goddes Sone of heven.

These sermons illustrate the importance of the idea of response. Christ is a lord in the one and a knight in the other, and man correspondingly must "worshippe hym and blisse hym as oure saviour" on the one hand, and recognize that "Euery man is . . . seruaunte" on the other. Moreover, implicit in the one and overt in the other is the idea that Christ’s status is unrecognized by man; as a "pore childe bonden in a cribbe," Christ has neither a knightly status nor a lordly status immediately apparent to the world.

I suggest that in Piers Plowman the idea of response together with a recognition of Christ’s knightly and lordly status accounts for much of Langland’s use of the Christ-Knight metaphor. If we return to the opening “prismatic image” in Passus XVIII where the Christ/Piers/Samaritan knight enters Jerusalem, we notice that he does not look like a knight — "Barefoot on an asse bak bootsles cam prikye, / Withouten spores other spere" (XVIII 11-12); in fact, he looks like “a knyght that cometh to be dubbed” (XVIII 13), again, not like an accomplished knight. Gaffney suggests that Christ
here rides in disguise in order to entice the devil, who would not otherwise venture into combat, and the text supports this reading. But he resembles more the “fair unknown” of chivalric romance, whose status and identity are unknown or even mocked until revealed in subsequent deeds, until Bew-maynes emerges as Sir Gareth. Christ’s knightly identity is questioned by the dreamer, and later by Pilate and the Jews; one names him a “wicche” (XVIII 46), whereas another mocks his nobility with a crown of thorns and belittles his “maistrie” with “Ave, raby!” (XVIII 50), tempting him with, “If thou be Crist and kynges sone, com down of the roode” (XVIII 55). All of this is biblical. To his accusers, Christ hardly seems a “kynges sone,” but a worthless and common seeker, unworthy of the “lordship” of knight or king. The narration/narrator opposes this view, and discloses his real status — “The lord of lif and of light” (XVIII 59). Although they cannot see Christ’s knightliness, the soldiers at the Crucifixion refuse “Goddess body to touche; / For he was knyght and kynges sone” (XVIII 75–76). In the final line, the narrator, not the soldiers, recognizes the nobility of Christ.

The lord-servant motif throughout Passus XVIII and XIX functions primarily, I suggest, to underscore the knight-commoner theme, which in turn represents a variation of the Christ-Knight metaphor and the related extension of the theme of response. In the traditional metaphor, Christ appeals to mankind to recognize his redemptive action; the knight appeals to the commoner to act properly in relation to his status. In *Piers Plowman*, those who recognize Christ as lord/knight respond by means of the social, ritual, and liturgical acts of kneeling and of naming Jesus “lord”. Jesus proves himself a knight, and hence recognizable as such, in his Crucifixion in the original structure of the metaphor, and in *Piers Plowman* the Crucifixion scene reveals Christ’s knightliness as well. Blind Longinus, “a knyght with a kene spere ygrounde” (XVIII 78), pierces the side of Christ, so that blood spurts into his eyes; immediately Longinus recovers his sight, and sees Christ for the knight he is. Elsewhere, Langland indicates that social order determines that inferiors must kneel before a knight — “To be called a knyght is fair, for men shul knele to hym” (XIX 28), and the first acts of Longinus upon regaining his sight and recognizing the Christ-Knight are to kneel and utter the word “lord”:

The blood sprong doun by the spere and unspered the knyghtes eighen.
Thanne fil the knyght upon knees and cryde Jesu mercy:
“Ayein my will it was, Lord, to wownde yow so soore!” (XVIII 866–88)

The Christ-Knight metaphor, with its response motifs of kneeling and naming, account for Langland’s rhetorical strategies throughout much of
Passus XVIII and XIX. The final sections of Passus XVIII exhibit a pattern of repetition which A.C. Spearing calls "interlocking repetition" in which "two or more different repetends are interlocked," and he notices that variations of "lord" and "light" cluster in the Harrowing of Hell episode, until they merge in a "triumphant identification of lordship and brightness." In Passus XIX, a related pattern of repetition based on variations of the verb "to kneel" complete the development of response motifs originating with Longinus. Some form of this verb occurs some twelve times. Finally, the patterns of kneeling and naming reappear in a biblical quotation, also in Passus XIX, "Omnia celestia, terrestria, flectantur in hoc nomine Jesu" (XIX 80a; Phil. 2:10). As John Alford notes, the length of the Latin quotation "owes more to scribal practice than to the author himself — the length of the quotations varying even from one manuscript to another;" in other words, the full scriptural context must often be taken into consideration and not merely the single Latin tag. The full biblical context of Langland's Latin quotation is as follows:

Hoc enim sentite in vobis, quod et in Christo Jesu: qui cum in forma Dei esset, non rapinam arbitratus est esse se aequalem Deo; sed semetipsum exinanivit formam servi accipiens, in similitudinem hominum factus, et habitu inventus ut homo. Humiliavit semetipsum, factus obediens usque ad mortem, mortem autem crucis. Proper quod et Deus exaltavit illum, et donavit illi nomen quod est super omne nomen, ut in nomine Jesu omne genu flectatur caelestium, terrestrium, et infernorum, et omnis lingua confiteatur, quia Dominus Iesus Christus in gloria est Dei Patris. (ad Philippenses 2:5-11)

[Let your bearing towards one another arise out of our life in Christ Jesus. For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a [servant]. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death — death on a cross. Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow — in heaven, on earth, and in the depths — and every tongue confess, "Jesus Christ is Lord," to the glory of God the Father.] The full biblical quotation illustrates the significance of the Christ-Knight metaphor. Christ enters the human world "formam servi accipiens;" he dies on the cross, for which he is exalted by God; in recognition of his divine status in human form, his "lordship," every knee bows and every tongue proclaims him "lord." Alford terms this method of structuring English passages around a Latin quotation, "toward which as well as from which the preacher is constantly working," concordia verborum, a rhetorical strategy of the artes praedicandi. It also resembles what Robert of Basevorn calls
unitio, where all disparate strings of a theme are brought together in a single authoritative quotation. All rhetorical ploys, repetition, concordia verborum, and unitio extend and develop the extended Christ-Knight metaphor and the response motif.

The Christ-Knight metaphor in Piers Plowman is handled by Langland in, according to modern standards, a most unusual way. From one point of view, the metaphor seems to separate into the concrete and the allegorical, the former existing solely for the purpose of expressing the latter, and a problem arises when the concrete vies with and/or outweighs the central allegorical thrust. I hope I have demonstrated, at least in part, that the conflict is illusory. Mediaeval rhetorical techniques and traditional developments of the original Christ-Knight metaphor explain Langland’s taking off with the metaphor itself and leaving the allegory behind. The text, then, is not sabotaged, although the ploy for textual concordance rests within a mediaeval rather than modern framework.

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NOTES


4 For example, A.C. Spearing, Medieval Dream-Poetry (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976) 159, comments that the poem might well have ended at Passus XVIII. He describes the last few passus as “surrealistic” (p. 158) and “inconclusive” (p. 159), fragmentary and vague (p. 160). Although Spearing argues that all of this contributes to the dream-like quality of the poem, his observations cited above render this justification somewhat impotent. Margaret Bridges, “The Sense of an Ending: The Case of the Dream Vision,” DQR 14, 2 (1984) 89, remarks, “The dream framework, rather than lending the poem shape, is felt to disrupt completion,” and further notes that the device of waking, which normally functions in dream visions as a definitive act of closure, in Piers Plowman “makes nonsense of one’s association of waking with closure” (p. 30).

5 Priscilla Martin, Piers Plowman: The Field and the Tower (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1979) 90.

6 Martin (at n. 5) presents her case in Chapter 4, “Abstract and Concrete.”

references will be to the text of this edition.

8 For example, Christ's passion becomes “a bitter bataille” (XVIII 64); the soldiers who break the legs of the thieves refuse to do so to Christ, “For he was knyght and kynges sone” (XVIII 76); and Longinus, after having speared Christ, thereby having his sight miraculously restored by the blood which splashes into his eyes, “yields” himself to Christ in typically knightly fashion (on this last point, see Derek Pearsall, ed., *Piers Plowman* by William Langland: An Edition of the C-Text, York Medieval Texts, Second Series [London: Edward Arnold, 1978] 323, n. 94).


10 Gradon (at n. 9) 74.

11 Gradon (at n. 9) 76.

12 Martin (at n. 5) 87.


16 Waldron (at n. 16) 74.


19 St.-Jacques (at n. 13) 147.


21 Woolf (at n. 18) 5.

22 This short extract from *Coment le fiz deu fu armé en la croyz* appears in Waldron (at n. 15) 69.

23 Waldron (at n. 15) 68.


26 Simpson (at n. 14) 469 ff. argues differently; he sees “by which God is likened to a lord and man to a cherl” indicative of Langland's practice of exploiting earthly institutions (for example, feudalism) in order to express spiritual truths.


28 Gaffney (at n. 17) 166. See *Piers Plowman*, XVIII 24: “That Crist be noght biknowe here for *consummatus Deus*.”


31 Spearing (at n. 30) 728–29.

32 The repetitions in Passus XIX are as follows: "kneled" (12), "sholden knelen" (17), "shul knele" (28), "knelynge" (74), "knelede" (75), "knelede" (81), "knelede" (91), "knelynge" (95), "knelynge" (151), "to knele" (201), "knelede" (208), and "Knele now" (210). I have explored this pattern of repetition more fully in my forthcoming article cited in n. 29.

33 John A. Alford, "The Role of the Quotations in Piers Plowman," Speculum 52 (January 1977) 82.

34 Translation taken for the most part from The New English Bible for the accuracy of the translation from the Latin.

35 Alford (at n. 33) 86.
